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## An Exploration of Bi-Sexual Harmony in *The Awakening*

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### Abstract

Edna has beautiful look, excellent drawing talent and exuberant thought. She is eager to evade her role as wife and mother and to enjoy men's free world. But finally she ruins herself in the disillusion of her dream. The man protagonist, Robert, is handsome, careful and tender. But he is cowardly in character and lacks the sense of responsibility which a man should have. And finally he does not manage to hold his love. The paper focuses on the study of the inevitability of the imbalanced bi-sexual powers of the two protagonists and their tragedies so as to advance the exploration of the topic of bi-sexual harmony.

**Key words:** Bi-sexual powers; Bi-sexual imbalance; Inevitability; Bi-sexual harmony

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### INTRODUCTION

Kate Chopin, as a pioneering woman writer in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, published her masterpiece and also her last work *The Awakening* in 1899. With exquisite and passionate description, it portrays an American bourgeois woman named Edna who grows from a traditional wife and mother without identification into a new woman who fights against tradition and patriarchal authority to pursue

freedom and dream. However, in the man-dominated society, just as Judith Fryer states that "Edna is a woman, alive. But that society does not even prepare a place for her" (Fryer, 1976, p.257). Finally, what she can feel is perplexity, solitude and disillusion and she chooses to end her life in the sea.

For a long time, *The Awakening* has been seen as a banned book because traditional moral is not ready to accept women's consciousness and rebel. However, nobody can deny the value of the book. Critic C.L Davis, also Chopin's friend, observes that "It is pitiful, crazy and abhorrent. But to be frank, the attainment of the novel has reached the peak of art" (Davis, 1934, pp.104-105). In 1960s, with the development of feminist movement, *The Awakening* was regarded as the Bible of feminist liberation in American literature and inspires the advancement of the movement. The research on Chopin's *The Awakening* did not begin in China until at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But the study is chiefly confined to the perspective of feminism.

In the new century, with the development of society and the progress of people's thoughts, and as more and more people are concerned about the issue of bi-sexual relation in life, people's focal point is shifted to *The Awakening* again. However, most of the predecessors ascribe the awakening of women's consciousness to the characteristic of androgyny. In fact, their opinions only emphasize the importance of the existence of androgyny. In order to do an overall study, the thesis studies whether the existence is reasonable. In other words, there should be a fixed standard for androgyny. Therefore, the thesis will concentrate on the study of bi-sexual powers in the two protagonists of the novel and its reflection on their characters, thoughts and behaviors. It comes to the conclusion that it is the imbalanced bi-sexual powers in them that lead to their final tragedies. The problem is, as the pace of life in today's world grows ever faster, the phenomenon of the imbalance of bi-sexual power is worse

and worse. To re-establish a normal and harmonious relationship between men and women in society, it is crucial and necessary to maintain bi-sexual harmony in the new century.

## 1. MEN AND WOMEN IN THE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

Generally speaking, novels can always reflect social reality in a particular time. The social background Chopin sets in the novel is the epitome of that of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The 19<sup>th</sup> century is also what we call the patriarchal society. Under this system, men almost control everything and have the absolute right on marriage, family and work. Instead of having an equal status in marriage, husbands are always superior to wives. Although as a member of the family, men do not have to deal with any household chore, they all leave it to their obedient wives. It seems that supporting family is their only duty. That is why most of the time men play the role as dictators in life and any challenge or threat to their authority is intolerable.

In the novel, Mr. Pontellier is the representative of men in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The thoughts of the patriarchal society have been deeply rooted in the values of people at that time. To them, men like Mr. Pontellier should possess and show enough men power. It is argued that Mr. Pontellier puts his business in the first place; his wife Edna is only a part of his abundant property. The conjugal relationship is a kind of subordinate status. For instance, he can ask for his sexual desire to be satisfied whenever he wants. Every day he does business outside to make enough money to support his family. His crazy pursuit for money and material is next to the extreme degree and his value is fully material and impersonal. Therefore, he carefully looks after his seen and unseen property. To him, a man should be like this, or he is not an eligible man. Strong man power almost occupies the whole body of every man. As a matter of fact, people of that time also judge men by this criterion. So there is no doubt that this kind of thought can influence so many people in that social background.

In *The Awakening*, morals in the Victorian period are still occupying a dominant position in the whole society. Barbara Welter argues "True Women are to hold the four cardinal virtues: Piety, Purity, Submission and Domesticity." in his book *The Cult of True Womanhood* (Barbara, 1966, p.147). At that time, it is known to all that women's essential duties in life are to look after families and give birth to babies. Their role as creative person has been deprived. They are confined in small houses playing their fixed roles as good wives and mothers and tools for fertility. To many people, women should be satisfied if they have comfortable material life and play the role of wives. As Showalter Elaine indicates that "Unlike men, women cannot have strong desire for sex and initial needs

for sex" (1988, p.36). That is to say, mental aberration can sometimes be tolerable. But if a woman has the desire for sex which is inconceivable and against the convention, she cannot be accepted by the public. It is claimed that if a woman abandons her duty as wife and mother to pursue freedom and emancipation, there is only one thing waiting for her—death.

In the novel, Madam Ratignolle is undoubtedly an ideal wife and mother of all men. Her gentleness and beauty are the embodiment of women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Her beauty makes her the ideal tool for sex. Her femininity supports her to be a good mother. Her value of existence firstly is to satisfy her husband's sex desire. She devotes her whole life to her husband and children. In fact, her whole value of existence is faithfully playing her appointed roles in the patriarchy society.

## 2. ANALYSIS OF BI-SEXUAL POWER IN EDNA AND IN ROBERT

According to Virginia Woolf's theory (1929) of androgyny in *A Room of One's Own*: Inside everybody, there are two kinds of powers which control everything. One is man power, the other is woman power. In a man's brain, man power is superior to woman power while in a woman's brain, woman power is in the dominant position....

However, in *The Awakening*, the two powers of the two protagonists are reversed. Edna, a woman, instead of having more woman power, has more man power. Robert, a man, has less man power. This is a typical phenomenon of the imbalance of bi-sexual power.

In general, when evaluating a person, different people have different criteria. But after all is said and done, these criteria can never be beyond appearance, behaviors, character, psychology and thoughts.

Most often, appearance is the first criterion for people to judge a person. As to Edna's appearance, Chopin writes "Her eyebrows were a shade darker than her hair. They were thick and almost horizontal, emphasizing the depth of her eyes. She was rather handsome than beautiful" (2004, p.3). It is known to all that "Handsome" is a word which people use to describe a man's appearance. But here Chopin puts it on Edna. It is easy for people to draw Edna's image in our mind. It will never be an elegant woman. It seems that Chopin has already suggested that Edna had been regarded as a man consciously or unconsciously and she would never be a traditional woman because she was born with man's traits. Besides direct description, Chopin also comments on Edna's appearance, it writes:

The charm of Edna Pontellier's physique stole insensibly upon you. A casual and indiscriminating observer, in passing, might not cast a second glance upon the figure. But with more feeling and discernment he would have recognized the noble beauty of its modeling and the graceful severity of poise and movement... (2004, p.14)

Different from other women, Edna does not have Madam Ratignolle's delicate look and attractive figure or Reisz's ordinary even ugly face; she is not only charming, coquettish but also smart and virile. To some extent, rather than consider her a woman and appreciate her woman power, the thesis explores her man power out of her soul. Her appearance and temperament all reflect men's characteristics.

In the novel, like many other objects, women are often appreciated and commented on by men. It is observed that Though they are the incarnation of beauty and highly praised by men, they could never get rid of their status as belongings and ornament. However, during Edna's awakening, she begins to challenge the long-received tradition and try to do something which is beyond her range. Instead of being willing to be somebody's property, she wants to look at the whole world from her own point and judge others by taking herself as the yardstick.

In the novel, it says that "Never had that lady seemed a more tempting subject than at that moment, seated there like some sensuous Madonna, with the gleam of fading day enriching her splendid color" (Chopin, 2004, p.11). This is a description of Madam Ratignolle from Edna's eye. Edna's bold behavior does surprise people. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is widely acknowledged that it is men's right to appreciate women's beauty. However, she surpasses the border of women's rights and intrudes on men's world. During the process, instead of being still and positive observee, Edna is in the position as an initial observer like men.

In order to obtain the ultimate freedom, Edna chooses to pursue economic independence. So she begins to develop her talent for drawing. To her, Drawing is the best way of expressing herself because Art could let people get heart's freedom. It emancipates people's feeling and becomes the perfect way of expressing people's sensibility. In the novel, Edna tries to win her economic status by making money through selling her drawings so as to thoroughly shake the economic dependence on her husband. "Whatever was her own in the house, everything which she had acquired aside from her husband's bounty; she caused to be transported to the other house, supplying simple and meager deficiencies from her own resources" (Ibid., p.83). This is an ideal life that Edna wants to live. Her moving out of the villa is a bold behavior because only men can regard art as their life-long target in the patriarchal society. In addition, in the villa which is filled with property bought by her husband, Edna's asking for spiritual independence lacks power. Therefore, the first step for Edna to breach the fence of tradition and family is to move out of the cozy villa and move into the "pigeon house" which belongs only to her. This is another bold behavior that is beyond her right range as a woman. And all in all, this originates from the strong man power in her.

When it comes to men, people will draw a very robust image in their minds' eye which is mostly the impression

from the appearance. Compared with exterior feathers, people pay more attention to a man's interior qualities like courage, sense of responsibility, decent ways of treating others and so on. But Robert is a different man of this kind. He is lack of many of these necessary qualities.

Robert, as one of the three important men in Edna's life, is young, handsome and romantic. However, mostly he is regarded as a coward. This is not only indicated in his life, but also in his attitudes towards love. When people are surprised by his decision to go to Mexico, his answer is "I said all along I was going to Mexico; I've been saying so for years" (Ibid., p.41). Facing future, Robert does not have a definite goal. In that patriarchal society, making money and supporting family is a man's whole-life duty. However, Robert is hesitating about his career. Even though he finally makes a decision, he has lost many opportunities and his best age time. And confronted with love, he is not as bold as Edna. He deeply loves Edna, but he is unable to face his own heart. Due to the influence of moral beliefs, loyalty and so on, he clearly knows that their affair can not be accepted by the public. Then he hides his love for Edna. On public occasions, he restricts his words and behaviors. As a man, he is cold enough to let a woman bear the duty of love alone. There are enough reasons for people to call him a coward. Even worse, when Edna leaves her husband's villa to live in the "pigeon house", Robert still has no courage to elope with her. He says they could be together only when Mr. Pontellier sets Edna free and admits their private love. Sometimes he is foolish to waste time dreaming of impossible things. Suppose they obtain the admission from Mr. Pontellier, people can still doubt whether he has the courage to bear the pressure from the public and his own principles.

Besides being the son of Mrs. Lebrun, Robert spends most of his time accompanying women and children around him. His instinct of wandering around beautiful women can be comprehended. However, this kind of company is different from the general man and woman company in the man-dominated society. The general one puts women in a low status and women absolutely serve men's any needs without complaint. When it comes to Robert's relation with women, it seems that Robert is in an even lower state which is worse than a woman's. Although Robert can talk freely and laugh happily with those women, he is only playing the role as a servant or even a "liar-comedian-silly" in those women's eyes. To them, he is a kind of tool which can bring them convenience and fun. Without these functions, he means nothing. In fact, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, these functions should be performed by women. But he is willing to play such a woman's role. Besides, Robert can play happily with Edna's two young sons. Generally speaking, children are fond of the company of their mothers. But Robert, as a man, can have a good relationship with them at that particular period. This is a little bit out of imagination. He takes good care of them. Compared with Edna, the two boys prefer to

play with Robert. It proves that there are some maternity in Robert that makes him the intimate friend of beautiful women and good nanny of children.

### 3. INEVITABILITY OF EDNA'S AND ROBERT'S TRAGEDIES

There are many reasons causing a tragedy, exterior factors and interior factors, and the latter ones play a greater role. In the novel, they both end with tragedies. Among all the reasons, the thesis pays more attention to the flaws of two protagonists themselves. For example, Edna expects too much on men's freedom and Robert lacks men's sense of responsibility.

Besides three men, there are another two women who influence Edna's life: they are Madam Ratignolle and Reisz. The former one almost devotes her whole life to her family by being an obedient slave. She seems to live a happy life which is many women's life-long dream. But actually, she is nobody. "She never realizes her as an individual being. She is only playing the role as wife and mother. She never has a complete life or be a true self" (Peggy, 1985, p.94). Another woman, Reisz, does not depend on anyone or belong to any man. She wins her economic independence by her fabulous piano performance. She never gets married or experiences love. Her situation as no wife and mother enables her to fully enjoy freedom and independence. However, she gets this kind of freedom only at the cost of never being understood by others and never winning men's love. Compared with them, Edna cannot depress herself like Madam Ratignolle and get a career without experiencing rich love like Miss Reisz. Finally as what is argued by Wheeler B Otis that what is irony is that Edna is in confusion. The only way for her to support herself is to refuse to play any feminine role in life—mother, wife or lover. This rejection separates her from the current society.

As a woman, the man power in Edna decides her roles in the society and her way of life. However, she wants to show her man power to surpass borderline of sex and become a complete human being. In order to protect men's ascendancy over women, the patriarchal system puts sex-partition in the first place. Any kind of violation is unacceptable. Edna, a betrayer of bi-sexual harmony is doomed to be hit by the reality and end with tragedies. Just as Elz A Elizabeth addresses in order to liberate myself by ruining myself, death is the only choice.

When it comes to Robert, his image as a flirtatious man impresses people a lot. In fact, in the novel, Robert is described as "A man who has constituted himself the devoted attendant of some fair dame or damsel. Sometimes it was a young girl, again a widow; but often as not it was some interesting married woman" (Chopin, 2004, p.10). It is obvious that Robert's devotion for women is not stable. Though those women are at different ages and in

different status, he does not care who they are and he only enjoys talking and laughing with them. Meeting with so many young girls and women, why doesn't he choose one to end his single state? The answer is: he is unfaithful to love. For example, he is too young to know what true love is. But among all the reasons, the most fatal one is that he lacks man's sense of responsibility. He is too young to take any responsibility of family and marriage. In the aspect of family, except being good at some languages, he has no other living abilities. Therefore, he could only be a clergy man. The salary could only support his daily life. In the novel, he smokes cigarettes because he could not afford cigars. How could a man-like this have the ability to support his family? From this point, Robert is inferior to Mr. Pontellier.

Faced with love, Robert is afraid of being trapped by love and taking the responsibility of family as a real man. That is why he refuses to enter the hall of marriage. Therefore, for the past fifteen years, he has always wandered around those women, just like a playboy, but never gives them his true heart. Although he deeply loves Edna, finally he leaves her in deep sorrow. In fact, as an old saying goes the leopard cannot change its spots; it is not easy to guess the reason.

### SUMMARY

Edna, as a housewife of the upper class, young and beautiful, could have been another Madam Ratignolle "Who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels" (Chopin, 2004, p.7). However, the man power in Edna is expanding day after day and finally changes everything. She refuses to fulfill her duties as a good wife and mother. She appreciates women's beauty like men. She pursues economic independence by drawing. She moves out of the villa to live in her pigeon house. All these indicate that Edna pursues men-women equality and women's independence in economy and spirit. But her woman power is completely covered by her man power. As a result, Edna lost her life in the illusion of herself being a man.

As to Robert, with charming appearance and good family background, it is not difficult for him to find a girl to get married. But he prefers to accompany a group of women and children. Instead of admitting his love and face his own heart, he chooses to have intimate relations with them. In conclusion, he is afraid of taking any responsibility as a man. Throughout the novel, he behaves just like a coward. In fact, all his behaviors prove his lack of man power. That is why he finally loses his loved one.

As a woman, Edna's thoughts and behaviors are all man-like. The man power almost completely dominates

her soul. Robert, with a man's body, could not be a real man according to the standard of men of that time. The thesis attributes their tragedies to the imbalance of bi-sexual power in them. In the new century, in order to solve the severe problem of the imbalance of bi-sexual power, bi-sexual harmony has been put in the first place. Their tragedies also prove Virginia Woolf's words, "The most normal and fittest condition of the two powers (men power & women power) is that they can exist in harmony with each other" (1929, p.127). Only by doing this, can be a healthy and harmonious society be established.

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